

BOOK REVIEW

The Enigma of Rosalie: Harry Price's Paranormal Mystery Revisited

by Paul Adams. Hove, UK: White Crow Books, 2017. xix + 273 pp. £12.99, US\$17.95. ISBN 978-1786770134.

This unusual and absorbing book reads like a detective story, as it should, for that is what it is—the search for a plausible solution to one of the most controversial episodes in the history of psi research.

It began on December 8, 1937, with a telephone call to Harry Price (1881–1948), the highest profile psychical researcher of his generation, making him an offer he could not possibly refuse: to attend a meeting of a private home circle at which the materialized spirit of a six-year-old girl named Rosalie regularly appeared. No names were mentioned other than hers, and Price had to agree not to reveal the whereabouts of the private house somewhere in the London area where the sittings took place.

He duly attended the meeting, and the following day a number of his colleagues noticed that he seemed to be unusually affected by the events of the previous evening. “Shaken to the core,” said one. “Deeply disturbed, almost distraught,” said another, while his longtime associate Kathleen (‘Mollie’) Goldney recalled that “he was more excited and shaken than I had ever seen him.” What can have had such influence on a man known for his willingness to unmask fraudulent mediums, which in his experience far outnumbered those such as Stella Cranshaw and the Schneider brothers Willi and Rudi whom he considered to be genuine?

To his credit, by the end of the day Price had written a 5,000-word report on what he had experienced. It had been an unusual séance, for Price had no idea who his hosts, Mr. and Mrs. X, or their guest Mme. Z, really were except that Mr. X was a prominent businessman and Mme. Z was the French mother of the deceased six-year-old who, he was assured, often dropped in at their meetings. The Xs’ teenage daughter and a young man Price assumed to be her boyfriend were also present.

Price was understandably somewhat befuddled by his evening’s work, which had begun with a thorough search of the whole house during which he sealed all the doors and windows, leaving him satisfied that there was nowhere for an accomplice to lurk. He was perplexed by the apparent absence of a medium, or any of the usual rituals of the Spiritualist meetings he had so often attended. He was impressed, however, by the arrival on the scene

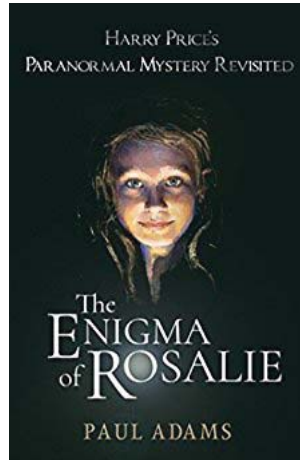
of Rosalie, accompanied by much weeping and wailing from her bereaved mother, who allowed him to examine the phantom by touch, which he did. He also noted that Rosalie, by the light of the luminous plaque he was also permitted to use, “looked older than her alleged years.” One way and another, he found himself wondering “if Rosalie was a genuine spirit entity or if the whole thing was an elaborate hoax.” Only a second sitting in his well-equipped laboratory could settle the matter. It was one he particularly wanted to settle, as he faced an uncomfortable dilemma: Either the spirit world really existed, something he had always denied, or he had been hoaxed despite his long experience of revealing hoaxes inflicted on others.

Price’s account of his meeting with Rosalie was included in his book *Fifty Years of Psychical Research* (1939), which was published barely a month after the outbreak of World War II. It was generally well-received, reviews featuring such phrases as “erudite, critical yet vastly entertaining,” “comprehensive and well-documented,” “stimulating and very interesting.”

There were minority dissenting voices, however. One suggested that the Rosalie episode might be one of “definite and rather brazen fraud,” another finding it “a complete invention and unworthy even of Price,” while Price’s former colleague Eric Dingwall wondered “what is the real object of telling these tales?”

Following Price’s premature and unexpected death in 1948, his reputation as Britain’s leading authority on ghostly matters took some severe battering, notably in the attempted debunking of his best-known case, that of Borley Rectory (Dingwall et al. 1956), and later in Hall’s (1978) shamelessly biased and vituperative biography. Rosalie put in another appearance in a book by Dingwall and Hall (1958), described by Paul Adams as “a catalogue of missed opportunities which, if properly exploited, could have gone a long way towards solving the Rosalie case.”

Instead, it was “a superficially impressive but ultimately flawed and prejudiced examination.” Adams pointed out that there were several witnesses still alive who could have given support to Price’s activities at the start of the case, but none was consulted. Fortunately for posterity, new researchers now entered the fray. One was David Cohen (1965), a factory worker from Manchester who headed a small group of like-minded enthusiasts in his area, and who decided to carry out his own search for



the solution to the Rosalie mystery. He was later joined, independently, by fellow Society for Psychical Research members Richard Medhurst and Mary Rose Barrington, who tramped the streets of much of London in search of a house that fitted Price's description of the X residence (Medhurst 1965).

It was Cohen who obtained the scoop of his career when he managed to contact Rosalie herself, or at least the woman who had been masquerading as her, and to obtain her lengthy written confession, which Adams prints in full as Appendix B. This, if true (and there were those in the SPR who suspected otherwise) is a plausible scenario that answers many questions, including: Who were Mr. and Mrs. X and Mme. Z? Why were they so keen for Price to attend a séance, but only once and only if unaccompanied? Why were they so unlike all members of Spiritualist groups that he had encountered? What were they really up to? Paul Adams tackles these and many other questions head-on, and his intriguing and fully referenced book makes lively, enjoyable, and often surprising reading.

Reviewers of mystery stories should not give away their endings, so this Review will leave future readers with a brief trailer, from the letter from Rosalie to David Cohen (emphasis added):

It struck me as very amusing that Mr. Price should take so much trouble to seal the doors and windows when he was actually sealing Rosalie *inside* the room.

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